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Who Assesses Reading Status and Progress--Tests, Teachers, or Students?

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Student involvement in the assessment of reading status and progress is important, because the effectiveness of teachers and tests as evaluators has limitations. Translating test results into meaningful behavioral descriptions is a difficult task, and teacher assessment is sometimes limited by the temptation to respond quickly and definitely to a single factor such as a score, an incident, or an aspect of reading. Teachers exhibit a tendency to assess the status and needs of a student and then to conduct improvement programs which often ignore those needs. The students, because of personal motivation and understanding, can help to define realistic objectives for reading and studying and for assessing their own performances. Students' needs and goals are essential elements in devising reading improvement programs on the high school and college levels. (RT)

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WHO ASSESSES READING STATUS AND PROGRESS-- TESTS, TEACHERS, OR STUDENTS?

We hear a great deal these days about student involvement at secondary and college levels in decisions about curriculum, faculty, rules, evaluation, speakers, and so on. And without getting enmeshed in the political and social broil attending current demands and disruptions, I would like to suggest one small corner of the academic world where I believe students can and should be involved--in the assessment of status and progress in reading, their reading. In this context, reading is defined in the broadest sense--covering preferences, attitudes, the various skills, response to what is read, multiple purposes and applications--in other words, the perceptual, cognitive, affective, and practical aspects of reading. The emphasis, however, is on the cognitive and practical, since these are the most easily and most often measured attributes.

As it is, tests and teachers are charged with the greatest share of the assessment job, that is, the gathering of data; and standardized test results, along with teacher reports, also provide the primary base for evaluation...the making of judgements about the quality of performance and about the meaning of various findings. There are some good reasons for this state of affairs, and there are some distinct disadvantages.

First a look at tests. We are all familiar with the many articles, speeches, and even books which in recent years have inveighed against the uncritical use of standardized tests. Those arguments are as reasonable as they are numerous, and reflect the concern of many teachers and administrators involved in reading programs. The issue, to be sure, is not whether there should be tests or testing; nor is it a matter of which tests to use. The issue is the extent to which tests provide the information that we--and

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students--want in order to arrive at judgements and make decisions. And this leads to the crux of the matter: what do we want to make judgements and decisions about?

The tests which most of us use in determining status and progress in reading were developed for predictive, screening, and comparative purposes. The revised Nelson-Denny, The Davis Reading Test, and the College Board's SAT are good examples of instruments devised to predict general academic success. They are also employed in academic screening--as we are all too well aware!--just as achievement tests like the California and Stanford are often used in selecting candidates for special reading programs. And most all the commonly-administered tests serve the comparative function by providing norms of various sorts (for statewide testing programs, for example), and by yielding scores which can be used in experimental comparisons across both groups and treatments.

These tests generally are reliable and valid, as well as brief and standardized. And they have utility in survey status studies of large groups, in academic prediction, and in experimental comparisons as well as evaluation programs.

BUT, when it comes to assessing achievement, these tests provide only a quick and partial look into the total domain of skills and uses of reading, and they are almost always built around the power of items to discriminate between high and low scorers (which is related to the predictive function). If the only yield from a test is a single figure or score, then what have we learned? That a student places at the 43rd percentile or improves from grade level 11.0 to 12.7 tells us virtually nothing about his actual reading performance, even on the test! Unfortunately, such figures cannot be translated into meaningful behavioral descriptions. Even more unfortunate,

the figures do not represent such descriptions in the first place, since only a few nameable reading skills are sampled and the figures refer to comparative standing in terms of items correct. Even in instruments whose manuals state that several distinct aspects of comprehension are tested, no provision is made for determining or interpreting subscores.

It appears, then, that the instruments which provide a basis for prediction, screening, and comparison, do not fulfill a fourth and necessary job. They do not answer such questions about performance as: What can students do, and how well? Are they skimming effectively? How is Lucifer doing at studying chapters? Does he know and use context clues? What about drawing conclusions and using reference sources? In other words, it is not enough, from the <u>instructional</u> point of view, to say merely that students do or do not "read well," or that they read at given "grade levels."

Take just one illustration. Rate flexibility is a useful goal for virtually everyone. And a great many students know this and try for various rates (under pressure, anyway)! The survey tests tell us nothing about individual or group performance in this important skill; and even the one or two published instruments focusing on variable rates reveal only that students can and do vary their reading rates <u>as directed or suggested</u> in the test itself. We are left still wondering about students' actual rate variation, its extent, under what conditions, with what degree of "voluntary" intent, and related to what purposes.

The question was raised earlier, what do we want to make judgements and decisions about in our reading programs? Certainly we need to decide whom to serve, for how long, whether to continue or revise a course, how a program relates to improved grades, and so on. And standardized survey tests

are a definite aid at such times. They are not so valuable, however, when it comes to instructional applications after assessment has been completed. Additional information is required about the actual day-by-day reading and studying that students engage in.

Thus teachers and instructors, too, are charged with assessing status and progress in reading. And they are often in a position to do it and do it effectively. They make planned observations and keep records of reading activity. They determine "general success" with given textbooks and assignments. And, of course, they often interpret test scores. But in spite of the wisdom and experience which many possess, teachers generally do not have data at hand; they have impressions and recollections. And they are forced at times to make guesses as well as to rely on biases and hopes.

In addition, there are two other matters which tend to limit the effectiveness of assessment. First, there is a temptation to respond quickly or definitely to a single factor such as a score, an incident, or an aspect of reading. We have all used a total test score at times as a basis for screening or evaluation decisions in our programs; and in some cases, test scores are still used as a basis for grades. And we have all heard of instances where poor oral reading or slow reading rates, even in college, have been interpreted as clear signs of poor general reading ability. Second, there is a distinct tendency to assess status and needs--and then conduct improvement programs--in our terms, that is, the instructor's or administrator's terms. A quick look through the journals--or through the Proceedings of this Association--reveals how frequently this unfortunate attitude obtains, particularly in non-voluntary programs. Here is a sampling

of statements from recent sources that show how we often approach reading from the "adult's" point of view:

--students are made to realize that...
--the teacher has a variety of tests to choose from for diagnosing...
--there are many materials on the market which are interesting...
--the controlled reader device is used with all our subjects...
--the major objective of the program should be to...
--students must be led to see the values in later life...

Don't get me wrong. I am speaking here of tendencies and temptations. And while they do exist, they are not characteristic of all instructors or programs, by any means. In fact, in the past few years we have heard about individualized college programs (at Maryland, Cornell, and Minnesota, for example) where students are not necessarily tested at all and where they choose their own instructional packages and schedules. And that certainly puts the program into <u>their</u> terms.

Can we do something similar in required as well as voluntary courses which have stated schedules and programs? Even more basic a question, can we accept and use students' perceptions about their reading status? Can we learn from them something important about their goals? This may be the point at which some creative assessment can take place. We can't be sure that students perceive the same goals that schools do; nor that a reading program's objectives are broad enough to include all the goals students may have. But we may be quite confident that students have goals and that we can discover them, cooperatively. Then we may be able to lead them to "better" ones--goals that are more oriented to the future or to students' needs or to academic and occupational reality.

Students are pretty well trapped in schools and colleges--although that picture appears to be changing--whether or not they've expressed their own objectives or are aware of the institution's goals for them. Older

people, conversly, often simply will not go into adult education programs or join clubs and groups unless they first know and accept the objectives. We recognize that when a person adopts objectives, and understands how to attain them, he is given a real boost toward that attainment. And we know that there is even more motivational value if a person participates in goal-setting to begin with.

I have a suspicion that students are in a better position than we realize to spell out realistic objectives in reading and studying. They don't often do it, perhaps (probably because they are seldom asked to), but the capability is there. They also are in a good position to assess their own performance. They do not measure in terms of test results as we tend to, though; rather, they use other criteria: assignments completed, enjoyment, satisfaction with achievement, interest, the development of efficient procedures and time saved--and possibly even the grades they get! From this point of view, we should realize that tests and teachers suffer from a sampling problem that students don't have. That is, students by and large know the demands and sense whether or not they have been fulfilled. Tests, on the other hand, don't come close to including all the skills and purposes that students are often aware of; and teachers very often are not cognizant of the full range of demands placed on students or the skills they then need--especially when we consider that students have courses with several different instructors.

If we accept the foregoing, then what can we do to captalize on these notions in our programs and courses? There are several possibilities:

1. We can involve students directly by joining with them in specifying reasonable objectives. This is a vital step if we are then to join

them in assessing the achievement of objectives and the level of student satisfaction--in their terms. In particular cases (either individuals or groups), their goals may not fit our pre-determined taxonomies, but does that really matter? Similarly, the level of performance that is acceptable to students--for their purposes--may be different from what our expectations would suggest.

2. As an aid in such joint efforts, we can set up a grid of Content and Skills (illustrated in the accompanying chart) as a discussion base for establishing goals and for assessing status and progress. This would present students with a fairly complete spectrum of content and skills, but they would not necessarily consider every cell in the matrix. In fact, some cells would likely be ignored, such as 'literature and using graphic aids,' or 'technical material and critical reaction.' As it is, there are probably too many entries in both dimensions, and telescoping or reorganizing might be desirable.

Regardless of what the grid's entries are, however, we should include a number of comprehension applications, not just posit a global sort of comprehension. Students need to have available handles related to a variety of problems, uses, and skills that fall within the comprehension rubric; and by the same token, teachers will be aided in setting up instructional programs.

Clearly, this sort of matrix presents much too complex an assessment job for tests or teachers to carry off easily. Students, however (assuming their motivation and effort--which we must do in any case), would be able to assess their status and progress in the several cells of particular concern to them.

3. We can explore with students the domain of attitudes toward reading, by formal and/or informal means. This should be a rewarding venture for all concerned, but even more, it is important to the delineation of objectives. Unfortunate attitudes cloud one's faith in the utility of reading; and they blind one to the beauty of the efficiency skills. We should discuss openly (and judiciously attempt to modify) various attitudes and values that affect reading behavior, such as the following:

    1. It is important and necessary to read well orally.
    2. Every word and every sentence should be read faithfully.
    3. It is important to try to remember all that's read.
    4. Since the author wrote the material, and since he's a scholar, he is in charge--so to speak--of my purposes.
    5. I should have a meaning for all the words I encounter.
    6. One should read well enough in the first place so that there is no need to re-read.
    7. Motivation? Well, that's up to the author--and the instructor!

    Discussions on the genesis and implications of some strongly-held but restricting attitudes will aid considerably in the development of a more positive approach to reading. Many students, even at the college level, need to be helped to follow the advice of one of the more pithy recent lapel buttons: REPEAL INHIBITION!

4. We can develop criterion reading tasks for the most common needs and goals that students evidence. Skimming might be an example, or systematic chapter study, or following directions. Such situational tasks can get at performances which reading tests do not include, and at the same time can be developed in cooperation with students. An added benefit, vis-a-vis putting our programs into students' terms, is that the content as well as the activities of the task can be realistic, relevant to students' courses, and related to their goals.

5. Regardless of the amount or kind of assessment employed, we can provide feedback to students, quickly and in detail. They have every right to know wi ere they stand and how they've progressed, in order to evaluate for themselves and make some meaningful decisions. If instructors are faithful to this rubric, but have administered only a survey reading test, they may be forced into recognizing how difficult it is to translate test scores into behavioral terms that students can understand and make use of.
6. Finally, we can study our objectives and match them against the instructional program itself and the assessment procedures we employ. This is a crucial step in any case, but especially so when we have committed ourselves to seek out and capitalize on students' perceptions and goals. We must be sure that we have built the reading program around their goals, as well as curs, and have assessed status and progress in terms of those goals.

In summary, tests and teachers do not, and cannot be expected to, measure all that we need to know about status and progress. Still, it does not appear necessary to devise entirely new instruments or assessment programs. Rather, we need a change in emphasis from program objectives to students' objectives--with a parallel solicitation, acceptance, and use of their perceptions and goals for reading and studying. At the very least, students should have the opportunity to benefit from the further motivation that comes from participating in goal-setting. At the most, their needs and goals should become essential elements in devising the programs we offer and the means of assessment we provide.

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TESTS, TEACHERS, OR STUDENTS?

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Abstract

While tests and teachers are charged with almost the total assessment job, high school and college students can and should be actively involved in the determination of status and progress in reading. Otherwise, we will continue to depend on tests developed primarily for predictive and comparative purposes; and we will continue to view measurement--along with the underlying objectives--in our terms instead of students' terms. Students have perceptions and goals; we should solicit and use them.

Accepting these points, we can improve matters if we:

1. join students in specifying their needs and objectives in reading improvement programs, and in determining their progress and satisfaction;
2. present students with a means of understanding the whole range of reading skills and uses, and the interrelationships among them;
3. explore with students the important domain of attitudes toward reading, with special attention to the author-reader relationship;
4. develop criterion performance tasks as an aid in assessment;
5. provide assessment feedback to students, quickly and in detail;
6. match objectives (students' and ours) against the instructional program and the assessment procedures employed, as a check on the validity of our approach to assessing both status and progress in reading.

CONTENT	SKILLS AND USES																			
	A Thorough Reading	B Literal Meaning	C Details	D Main Import/Idea	E Chapter Study	F Structure	G Skim, Scan	H Follow Directions	I Summarize	J Critical Reaction	K Draw Conclusions	L Interpretations	M Appreciation	N Implications	O Evaluation	P State Purposes	Q Locate Information	R Rates	S Graphic Aids	T Oral Reading	U Vocabulary Power
1. Gen'l Descriptive Prose																				
2. Original Sources																				
3. Textbooks in all the Academic Disciplines																				
Science																				
Literature																				
Psychology																				
...																				
...																				
4. Recreational Reading																				
5. News																				
6. Pressure Prose																				
7. Commentaries, Reviews																				
8. Journals of Opinion																				
9. Technical Material																				
10. Reports and Research																				
11. Documents and Forms																				
12. Miscellany																				

Matrix showing possible classifications of reading Content and reading SKILLS AND USES. Each cell is potentially a locus for statement of objectives as well as assessment of status and progress (by formal and/or informal techniques).